

5. AVOID THESE COMMON ESSAY MISTAKES THAT MAKE REVIEWERS WANT TO POKE THEIR EYES OUT

You want to write a stellar essay—one that not only conveys your personality with eloquence, but that also fully addresses the prompt. As reviewers, we want to be moved, surprised, shaken out of our application-reading comas. So how do you achieve this? One of the easiest ways to write a compelling essay is, surprisingly, by simply avoiding the following mistakes that we and our colleagues gripe about year after year. We've described the top five essay mistakes that we see here.

Mistake #1: Student Reiterates Transcript/Résumé

In all our years of experience in admissions, scholarships and grantmaking, one of the saddest moments is reading a short-answer response or essay that turns into a list of accomplishments, grades and classes. Don't fill your valuable essay space with information that can easily be found in the activity section of your application or on the transcript we've asked you to provide. If you do mention something that is already in another part of the application, you should do so intentionally, providing fresh insights. Maybe you're the head of a number of school clubs. An exploration of how this teaches you leadership and time management would be much better than simply listing the clubs and all of your responsibilities.

Mistake #2: Students write more about the person important to them than themselves

Remember when we wrote those essays about our role models in sixth grade? They all sounded the same because they focused on biographical details of the role model. Selection committees don't care to learn still more minutiae about the life and times of Abraham Lincoln, Margaret Thatcher or even your Grampa Joe. These people aren't applying for college or scholarships. You are. Make sure that you and what you've learned from the other person are the focus of your personal essay.

Mistake #3: Writes more about issue than themselves

Similarly, issue-based essays provide a great opportunity for applicants to demonstrate their passion for a cause. Many times, however, these essays end up focusing entirely on the issue at the expense of cutting the applicant out of the story. Your essay may make a solid argument that the stagnating income of middle-class Americans is a serious threat to long-term economic growth,

but you have to spend at least half of the essay discussing your role in addressing this issue and explaining why it influences your life in particular. Otherwise, reviewers will feel like they read a generic newspaper article rather than having gained any new insights into you as a person.

Mistake #4: Writes more about what happened than its significance

Don't build up the tension with a great story that never ties back to its effect on you as a person. Leaving the selection committee with a giant "SO WHAT?!" at the front of their minds will not help your chances of being admitted or of receiving a scholarship. Instead, think of the 40-60 rule; roughly 40 percent what happened, 60 percent how you have changed or grown from living this experience. The key is to recount your experiences just enough that your reader knows what happened and then to spend the bulk of your time reflecting and sharing the meaning you've derived from those experiences.

Mistake #5: Writes about challenges but remains broken

Challenges and obstacles can be some of the more compelling elements of a college or scholarship application—that is, if the applicant is able to demonstrate how they've overcome their circumstances and grown as a person. You may be wondering if it is a good idea to include tragic events or express heavy emotions when retelling difficult parts of your life. It is, if the large remainder of your essay focuses on how you've changed as a result of them. Often this growth is hinted at but not explored because the obstacle itself seems to be more dramatic. That might be true for Hollywood, but we're looking for your personal insights, and those can only come after the fact.